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What is a prayer shawl?

Question: "What is a prayer shawl?"

Answer: The Jewish prayer shawl is a fringed garment worn by Jewish men on the outside of their regular garments in the synagogue, especially during morning, [Sabbath](#), and other holiday services. The Hebrew name for this prayer shawl is *tallit*, which simply means “a robe,” “a cloak,” or “a sheet.” The Jewish prayer shawl is usually made of wool or silk and is often long enough to cover most of the body, with special twined and knotted fringes attached to each of its four corners. In modern times it is not uncommon to see Jewish men wear a silk prayer shawl that is no more than a scarf around the neck. The ultra-Orthodox Jewish men wear the prayer shawl over the head when they recite the more important prayers.

Although the Hebrew word *tallit* is not found in Scripture, the biblical command for Israelites to wear a “fringed” or “tasseled” garment can be found in the Torah, in which God says to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God’” ([Numbers 15:38-40](#)). And also, “Make tassels on the four corners of

the cloak you wear” ([Deuteronomy 22:12](#)). So the original scriptural intent behind this fringed garment was to remind the Israelites of God’s commandments to them. According to Jewish understanding, the numerical value of the Hebrew word *tzitzit* (fringes) is 600. Each of the fringes contains 8 threads and 5 knots, making a total of 613. Based on rabbinical Judaism, this number corresponds to the [613 commandments](#) contained in the Torah.

Jewish prayer shawls are being promoted and marketed quite heavily today in the Messianic and [Hebrew Roots](#) movements, and they have also begun to make their way into some mainline Christian communities. Some Christians believe that, if the fringed garment is a garment that Jesus wore, it therefore should (or must) be worn by Christian believers today, both Jewish and Gentile, if they are going to observe Torah in accordance with the laws that God commanded. To this it is important to say that believers in the Jewish Messiah should avoid getting caught up in unhealthy practices. It is one thing to recover the Jewish foundations of the Christian faith; it is quite another to follow observances or traditions that bind us and put us once again under a yoke of legal bondage.

God’s New Covenant people are not called upon or required to wear the prayer shawl or any other type of fringed garment. Sadly, however, many well-meaning Messianic and Gentile believers seem to confuse the idea of Torah with that of covenant and therefore fail to “rightly divide the word of truth” ([2 Timothy 2:15](#)). The Law of Moses was given to the nation of Israel and intended to function as a “tutor” for receiving and understanding the Messiah’s greater instruction ([Galatians 3:19-25](#)). Followers of Jesus the Messiah, both Jewish and non-Jewish alike, are admonished not to revert to childish thinking but to understand spiritual matters with maturity ([1 Corinthians 13:11](#); [14:20](#); [Hebrews 5:12-14](#)). Failure to make a proper distinction between the Law and the gospel of grace always leads to doctrinal confusion within the covenant community of God’s people.

Even the most zealous among the Jewish people were not able to bear the burden of the yoke of the Law of Moses (see [Acts 15](#)). We who follow Jesus the Jewish Messiah are now led by the Spirit of God as God’s sons and are therefore no longer subject to religious regulations that command us to “touch not, taste not, handle not.” We are now called to seek those things that are above, where the Messiah reigns from on high ([Colossians 2:20-3:1](#)). Followers of Jesus have a “better covenant based on better promises” ([Hebrews 8:6](#)), and the Law was only a shadow of something greater that was promised by the prophets; that “greater something” is Jesus Christ ([2 Corinthians 3:18](#); [4:6](#)).

Recommended Resource: [The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down: The Lord's Prayer as a Manifesto for Revolution by](#)

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